Making the Leap

Suzanne Rea is a Reading Specialist and Title I teacher for first grade at Woodridge Elementary in San Antonio, Texas. She has taught at Woodridge Elementary in her current capacity and as a first grade teacher for the past 25 years. She began her teaching career in 1972, long before the widespread use of computers and the Internet in schools.

While Mrs. Rea’s primary interface with children consists of sitting “Elbow to Elbow, Knee to Knee (EEKK)” with a text that is matched to the students’ instructional level, she is no novice to the use of technology to support her teaching. Much of Suzanne’s Internet usage provides the infrastructure to her teaching via researching articles, checking on the latest programs and trends, and using technology to track data to monitor students’ progress. Arafeh and Levin’s research claims, “Much like a school-issued textbook or a traditional library, students think of the Internet as the place to find primary and secondary source material for their reports, presentations, and projects. This is perhaps the most commonly employed metaphor of the Internet for school-held by both students and many of their teachers alike.”

Suzanne’s first introduction to the world’s emerging technology was vicarous via her husband’s role as a scientist, utilizing the NSF network. Computers arrived in her home in the early 80s – Compaq- and her relationship with word processing began. Word processing, in stark contrast to her IBM Selectric, enabled her to forge ahead with her lesson plans, her studies to obtain her Masters degree, and to change the face of the school newspaper in the Department of Defense School in which she taught in Germany.

Much of what she learned about computers, Suzanne admits, was through watching her son latch on to the emerging technologies. Her first experience with gaming was the software program, Oregon Trail. From there, emerged the Sims and Sim City. Suzanne admits that she was overwhelmed at the capabilities of these programs. While she didn’t actively use these programs herself and often found them “objectionable” due to the amount of time her son spent engaged in these virtual activities, she certainly could identify with the potential value they could offer educators.

As a parent, Suzanne also supported her son in his efforts to use the Internet as an educational support for research and homework help. According to Hitlin and Rainie in their Pew Internet & American Life report, “Eighty-six percent of teens and 88% of online teens, believe that the Internet helps teenagers do better in school. Eighty percent of parents and 83% of parents online agreed with that proposition.” Suzanne and her son Jake fit that bill.

Suzanne admits that the use of the Internet makes researching articles a much easier task than pouring through microfiche or the card catalog in a library. Similar findings indicate that 52% of adult Internet users have done job-related research online (Lenhart, Simon, and Graziano, 2001).

She enjoys the benefits of Social Networking sites such as Facebook to keep in touch with colleagues and friends, melding the personal with the professional.

Mrs. Rea may not fit the typical profile of experienced educators leaping the digital divide. She doesn’t see the digital abyss as a danger or threat, rather an opportunity to expand her horizons and seek new strategies to reach her target – the students. She has participated in the Texas Reading Academies, acting as a collaborator and online resource for new teachers with questions. She participated in an early blog, named RT3, but found that it was less than successful, as the education world was not ready for such a communication platform.

Suzanne admits readily “I love to Google anything that tickles my curiosity.” She shares Facebook quizzes like “What color is your aura?” or “Which dead rock star are you most like?” with friends, colleagues, and family. Coincidentally, we even began our interview with a detour in topic to YouTube where she shared the viral “Pants on the Ground” video taken from a contestant on American Idol.

On a more serious note, Suzanne is an experienced educator who has taken the leap and the initiative to keep up with wave of change in order to best educate children. She is connected to the digital world both personally and professionally via listservs, bookmarking, email lists, etc. When asked if she will entertain the idea of online teaching when she retires, she answered, “most certainly, but probably with college level students who are seriously driven to further their education in their chosen profession.” Arsham supports this idea of using retired educators to fill the role of online teachers in his article, *Impact of the Internet on Learning and Teaching* (Arsham, 2002).

“What next?” concluded the interview. Suzanne’s response: “Twitter is my next hurdle.”

References

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